

## The Babe with the Power by FloralSkull

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Anxiety Attacks, Canon-Typical Violence, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, F/M, Family Drama, Fluff and Angst, Found Family, Friends to Lovers, Gen, Gift Giving, Hurt/Comfort, Memory Alteration, Mind Control, Mutual Pining, Other Additional Tags to Be Added, Recreational Drug Use, Sibling Bonding, Slow Burn, alcohol use, idiots to lovers

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Billy Hargrove, Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Original Female Character(s), Steve Harrington, Will Byers

**Relationships:** Eleven | Jane Hopper & Original Female Character(s), Jim "Chief" Hopper & Original Female Character(s), Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler & Original Female Character(s), Steve Harrington & Dustin Henderson, Steve Harrington/Original Female Character(s)

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**Summary:**

Nicole Brenner was number 6 in the Hawkins Lab's experiments. She and her twin sister Hannah, number 7, both have the ability to invade and control people's minds.

Both escaped Hawkins Lab at the age of thirteen, but in an attempt to keep them safe, Nikki did something unforgivable that made Hannah decide to go back to their father. For the entirety of her teenage years, Nikki has been on the run from the people who would love to drag her back to her father.

Now eighteen, Nikki heard about the strange happenings making the news from Hawkins, Indiana. In an attempt to try to help kids like Will Byers and El from suffering the same way she did, she returned to Hawkins in October of 1984.

After helping everyone save the world, becoming Nicole Hopper, and trying to find her place in this new family, she's attempting to make Hawkins her home once again.

## 1. Chapter 1

“Stay with me Harrington.”

Nikki lightly pushing Steve’s shoulder. He was starting to slump towards the passenger window and the last thing she wanted was him losing consciousness again.

She tried her best to keep her eyes on the road, not that there were many people on it at this time of night, but she kept glancing at him in the passenger seat. The adrenaline that had pushed Steve through the tunnels had evaporated once they had gotten the kids safely back to the Byers’ house. Hopper had been wary about the idea of dropping the two of them off at Steve’s car considering the way Steve had leaned heavily on the hood of Hopper’s truck.

Nikki had assured Hopper that she was fine to drive and would get Steve home safely. But first she realized that she needed to clean him up. There was no way she was depositing him on his doorstep with a bruised face, so she bypassed his street and continued on towards the trailer she’d been renting. The trailer that she’d just found out, during these past few day’s events, was Hopper’s.

“I’m with you.” He groaned and then sucked in a deep breath. He gingerly touched his nose and tried to sit up straighter. “How bad is it, really?”

“It’s not broken, and I don’t think you have a concussion. But I didn’t have a lot of time to look you over before we left.”

“What was the band-aid supposed to do?”

“I don’t know.” Nikki said, turning onto the long dirt driveway that led to the trailer. “But it made Dustin feel better, and I really wanted him to stop shrieking.”

Steve started to laugh lightly, but it turned into a protest of pain as the roughness of the dirt road jostled the car.

“Sorry.” She said, making a sympathetic face at him.

It was a bit of a struggle to get Steve up the stairs and onto her couch. He had protested at first that he didn't need her help, which went on for a good ten minutes until he finally gave in. She had most of his weight rested on her right side as she awkwardly maneuvered him up to her front door. She stopped in front of it, panting slightly and fished in her jeans for her keys.

"Shit."

She moved Steve to rest against her door as she tried every pocket in her pants and jacket.

"Shiiiiit."

"No keys?" He lifted his head slightly from the door where he was resting it and took her in with half lidded eyes.

"They're with my car." She sighed. "Which is either at the middle school or still parked at the Byers. Damn it!"

"Or Dustin's."

"You drove to Dustin's." She grumbled, searching in her pockets now for anything to pick her lock.

Steve watched her for a second before reaching above his head to the door frame. His body protested at first, but before she could stop him, he reached further to feel around for a second. When his arm came falling down from the frame, he had a key between his fingers. Nikki stared at him, lost for words.

"What place doesn't have a spare key?" He shrugged, holding it out to her.

She'd lived there for two weeks and hadn't thought to look for a spare key.

"Scoot."

She helped him lean against the railing so she could unlock the door,

then instructed him to lean on her again until she could drop him on the couch. She closed the front door and started turning on every light in the small space.

“Do you have ice?”

Nikki looked back over at the couch to where Steve was sitting with his head leaning back against the couch and holding his nose.

“Yeah.” She grabbed a clean dish rag and threw some stray ice cubes in it. She moved around to the living room and placed it on his nose as gently as she could. Despite her attentiveness, he hissed in pain. “I know, sorry. I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll be here.” He now sounded like he had a head cold.

She moved quickly to the bathroom and rummaged around in the cabinet and under the sink. Hopper had a halfway decent first-aid kit; she would at least be able to disinfect the nastier looking cuts. By the time she got back out there, Steve’s eyes were closed and his chest rising and falling evenly.

“Hey!” She said sharply, sitting down heavily on the coffee table directly in front of him. He jerked awake and clutched at the ice to secure it better to his face. “No sleeping, not yet anyway.”

“I thought you said I didn’t have a concussion.”

It almost sounded like a whine, and at this point she forgave him for it. His poor face had taken a hard beating and then he’d rallied to lead them all through the tunnels. She would never tell him this, but that was pretty selfless. Almost heroic. Almost.

“I don’t *think* you have one but, I still want to get your cuts cleaned up before anything else.” At this point she had opened the kit and removed the cotton balls and antiseptic. “Can you lean forward?”

“I think so.” He moved forward slightly, groaned, then fell backwards.

Nikki leaned forward and grabbed the front of his shirt.

“Wait, wait, wait.” He sounded panicked and she froze but didn’t let go of his shirt. He dropped the ice next to him on the couch and lifted his head so his was even with hers now. “Okay.” he sighed, and she pulled him forward towards her so his face was at a level she could clean.

He blinked a few times, trying to keep the grogginess from taking over his brain as Nikki poured a liberal amount of antiseptic onto the cotton ball. By the time it hit the first cut, Steve was wide awake and hissing in pain.

“These looked pretty deep before, but it must have been the blood.” Nikki said as she went through the third cotton ball. “I don’t think I’ll need to stitch up your face at all. Which is good considering I don’t have the steadiest hands when it comes to that shit.”

She lifted her arm to show a healed scar that ran the width of her forearm just below her elbow. It was not hospital grade, but it had healed.

“No offense, because I really appreciate you cleaning me up, but you aren’t going anywhere near my face with a needle.”

He sounded more like the Steve she’d met at Dustin’s now and that sent a sense of relief through her. She hadn’t realized how tense she’d been, waiting for life to come back to him. There was silence then as Steve stared at her as if studying her face as much as he could through slightly swollen eyelids.

“What?” She asked, lifting his chin slightly with her left hand and beginning to clean the last cut with her right. She didn’t have to tilt his head up, but she wanted to push his eyes away from her.

“You stopped the Demodogs in the junkyard from attacking me, didn’t you?” Even though it was a question, it didn’t sound like one. “Something felt off.” He went on. “Like they were going to miss me no matter what.”

He had it half right.

“I didn’t stop the Demodogs.” She corrected him as she gently tended

to that last cut. "I think I helped you."

"Me?"

"Yeah." She dropped his chin and busied herself with cleaning up the first-aid kit. "I, uh, well, you know how I yelled at you to get back to the bus?"

"I believe your exact words were 'Harrington, get your ass back on the bus.'" He laughed lightly to try and ease the pain in his ribs.

"Right." She tried to hide a small smile. "Well, I think, without meaning to, I used my powers to make sure you made it back."

While she didn't have the visible tell that El did, it was almost flattering that Steve thought she could control the Demodogs without giving any kind of verbal command. Eventually she'd be able to use her abilities again without being verbal, but it had been a long time since she'd used her powers consistently. She was so out of practice that she wasn't surprised a burst of fear had caused her to use her powers without meaning to.

"I promise, I won't use them on you again. It was honestly an accident I - "

"Is that why I rolled on the car hood like that?" He asked, concentrating on the last thing she expected him to.

"I don't think so." She finally looked up to meet his eyes. His own now flickered from her face down to her hands. "I think that was all you."

The silence that fell between them again was a bit more comfortable now, but Nikki still didn't like the way Steve was studying the hand that had been wiping away his grime. The hand that had her number tattooed on it. 006.

"Okay, you're all set, I think, just keep that ice on your face while I shower then I'll drive you home."

It was as if Steve snapped out of a trance.

“Yeah, okay.” He gingerly put the ice back on his nose. “But we’ve got to find your car first, then I’ll drive back to my place.”

“You’re in no condition to drive. I’ll drop you and your car off then walk back to the school to get mine.” She frowned. “At least, I think it’s at the school.” She thought back over the past two days. “Yeah, I’m pretty sure it’s at the school.”

“Not happening. You’re not walking back alone.”

It would have been honorable to hear Steve become protective, and ordinarily it would have annoyed her. But he was back to sounding like he had a head cold, so she had to try to suppress a smirk as she retorted.

“I’ll be fine.”

“We’ll go to the school, get your car, and I’ll drive myself back from there.”

He tried to get up. The key word being tried since both the pain he was in and Nikki’s harsh tug on his shirt sent him crashing back down on the couch.

“How easy is it to see me right now, Harrington?” She asked as he scowled at her.

“That’s not important.” He huffed, swatting her hand away and attempting to rise again.

“That’s actually very important.” She said, grabbing his shirt again to yank him back down. “Can you tell me how many fingers I’m holding up?”

She held up four fingers in front of his disgruntled face. He was silent for a moment as he studied her fingers. Then he removed the ice from his nose and squinted slightly at them. She snorted the longer it took him to answer.

“Four.” He finally answered, then placed the ice back on his face.

Nikki stared at him in shock before looking at her fingers to confirm



that she had in fact had four up this whole time. When she looked back at him he had a satisfied look on his face. Or as satisfied as his face could currently look under all the bruising and ice.

She glared at him for a few seconds before finally sighing. "Let me at least wash my hands and clean this up, then we'll talk about this."

"Fine." Steve said, sitting back to rest his head back against the couch again. "But was I right?"

"If you have to ask," she said, gathering up the blood-soaked cotton balls, "then I know you're guessing."

She made her way back to the bathroom as Steve called after her.

"It wasn't a total guess." Then said lower, hoping she wouldn't hear, "I could kind of see three of them."

Once inside the small bathroom, she discarded the used supplies and began to wash her hands. She hadn't realized that the tips of her fingers had become lightly caked in Steve's blood. She scrubbed at them hard under the warm water, lathering as much soap as she could under her nails. She became mesmerized by the movement of her hands over and over again as the water became less red.

Her eyes slid shut for a moment. She had slept for maybe a total of 8 hours over the past few days. Between leaving the middle school with Will and Joyce that afternoon, winding up at Dustin's with both him and Steve, luring the Demodogs to the junkyard, the lab, Billy, the tunnels, it was no wonder Hopper had been so hesitant to leave them on their own.

She opened her eyes and looked down at her hands in the sink again; they somehow looked less clean than before. The red of Steve's blood was making her feel as if something was pressing in on her lungs. She closed her eyes again and tried to steady her breathing.

There was a snap outside that made her jerk back to reality and open her eyes. The window closest to her was the one in her bedroom, which she could somewhat see out of from her current position. Her breathing more erratic now, she moved forward into her bedroom

slowly, dripping soapy water on the carpet. By the time she reached it, she realized she couldn't see anything in the sea of blackness outside. She turned from the window and closed her eyes and used her powers to reach out into the night.

She had gone so long with only using her powers sparingly that they sort of went dormant on her. At least, that was the only way she could describe it. After Will had opened up his mind to her so she could try to stop the Mindflayer, she hadn't been able to let her powers go back into that dormant state. Instead of being able to invade others' minds it was like they were invading hers. She tried to reach out anyway.

At first, she could only hear Steve. His mind sounded like a quiet hum. Had she not been panicking at that moment; she might have found it soothing. Much more soothing than any mind she'd heard before. Then she tried to feel out past the house. She was met with silence. No humans were out there. No humanoid creatures whose minds made a sound that she could only describe as otherworldly. A sound that made her want to grind her teeth together and curl in on herself.

She opened her eyes and slid down the wall until she was sitting and clutched her still wet hands to her chest. She tried to control the way her heart felt like it was going to break through her sternum. She tried to control the way her throat had constricted, making it harder and harder to get a good lung-full of air.

She tried to concentrate on the feeling of the wall pressing into her skull, but it wasn't enough to stop the panic that was quickly rising in her chest. She was faintly aware that she was digging her nails into her own palms, creating red stained crescent moons. But that wasn't enough to pull her attention from her inability to breath.

Then she heard it again, that quiet humming almost gently breaking through her thoughts. It felt like a cold breeze that eased away her fear, slowly, ever so slowly. After letting the humming of Steve's mind surround her for a few long minutes, she eased her nails from her palms, unclenched her jaw, and let her muscles relax. She hadn't let anyone's mind in like that in years and she was too exhausted to try to keep him out. It made her feel light-headed as she gasped for

breath. As the adrenaline and panic eased away, the migraine that came with her powers began to bloom at the base of her skull.

“Hey, Harrington, on second thought, could you maybe st - ”

She stopped short in the doorway. Steve’s hand had fallen slightly, taking the ice with it so it now rested on the side of his face. It was now healing another bruise that had blossomed there after he had removed the goggles he wore into the tunnels.

His eyes were closed, and his chest was rising and falling evenly. He started to lightly snore after a few deep breaths in and out. It didn’t look like a restful sleep. His brows were furrowed and his whole body looked like it was ready to jump at a moment’s notice.

Nikki watched him for a few moments. She was just as mesmerized by the slight twitching of his fingers as she had been of her own under the water. She looked down at them again, still slightly damp, still with blood crusted under her fingernails.

As quietly as she could, she grabbed his car keys, exited the trailer and popped the trunk of Steve’s car. Sitting in there was the nail bat, which she grabbed and brought inside with her. She did all of this without turning to look into the night; terrified of what she might see out there. Once she had locked the door, stripped her boots, and propped the bat by the couch, she moved towards Steve again trying to shake the October chill off her bare arms.

She eased the ice off of his face and placed it on the coffee table to take care of later and grabbed one of the pillows from the couch. She carefully slipped a hand under his head to rest it on the pillow so he wouldn’t wake up with a stiff neck. He stirred slightly, his nose scrunching up as much as it could in its current state, but he never opened his eyes.

She curled up on the other side of the couch and let the migraine and fear come rushing back. She had hoped it would keep her awake and vigilant, but her eyelids felt so heavy again and she felt herself drifting into a hazy sleep.

**Notes for the Chapter:**

Thanks so much for reading!

## 2. Chapter 2

### Summary for the Chapter:

Nikki's new life comes with uncomfortable changes and solidifying new friendships.

### Notes for the Chapter:

In my mind, Keith is the Kirk of Hawkins.

Nikki didn't want to attend school, high school or otherwise, for a number of reasons:

1. She had never been to school. Ever. She had been educated, sure, but not in the standard way. Even after she had escaped the lab, she had been too old to slip into the education system undetected.
2. She was still terrified of being caught. Even though a government employee knew about her, she still couldn't shake the fear that her father, no matter how dead El insisted he was, would be banging down her door in the middle of the night. This was Hawkins after all.
3. She had better things to do. El wasn't going to school yet and they had a lot of getting to know each other to do.
4. She had a job. That was, if Keith hadn't fired her for blowing off her shifts at the diner for a few days.

None of that seemed to matter to Hopper however, who, after receiving some excellently forged documents, was now 'legally' her uncle and guardian. It wasn't that he didn't care, he just cared about her in a way that no one ever had before. Which meant she didn't get a say in things like, not going to school.

"You're stuck with me for a year, kid! Then you can work at all the diners you want!" He had bellowed across the cabin at her the night they fought about this. "While you're under my roof, my say goes."

Well, not technically under his roof as the cabin didn't have enough room for her and him and El. She was also pretty sure that Hopper

was terrified of the idea of living with two teenagers. Let alone two teenage girls. Two teenage girls with mind powers.

The trailer she'd been renting was his though, and he was no longer collecting rent on it, so, his roof, his rules. Nikki hated it, sort of, but not really. That was how she found herself parking her car in the Hawkins High School parking lot one brisk November morning a week after Halloween.

Large crowds. She had forgotten to shout that one at Hopper as she listed off all the reasons she shouldn't have to go to school. Back when she first left the lab, she had been good at keeping the buzz of large crowds out of her head. Once she stopped using her powers, she was only good at it because she avoided the crowds. Eventually it was only an occasional thing, until finally it wasn't an issue at all.

Ever since moving to Hawkins she'd been using her powers more and more frequently. Which wouldn't have been a problem, wouldn't cause such lasting migraines, if she wasn't so out of practice. She had been adjusting somewhat to the size of the weird family she was now a part of, but it still felt as though she had to work harder than when she was first learning to use her powers to keep everyone's minds out of her own. It was frustrating, but she assumed this must be her punishment for not taking advantage of her abilities. At least, that's the way her father would have put it.

She could already feel a headache beginning at the base of her skull as she tried to shut all of the buzzing and vibrating out. She sighed before cutting the engine and leaving her car. She dreaded leaving the safety of it, even if it provided no barrier against the passing students. She was so distracted with her thoughts and the weird way some of the other kids' minds were meshing strangely with each other, that she walked straight into the chest of someone as she turned away from her car.

"I heard a rumor the Chief's niece was moving to town." She looked up into the face of Steve Harrington. "I guess that's your story now?"

She hadn't expected to see much of him after the events of that night. When they had both jolted awake in the early hours of the morning,

Steve by a nightmare and Nikki by Steve's yell of fear which had her scrambling towards the nail bat. He had called twice and left a message on her machine checking to make sure she was okay, but she had brand new identity things to worry about, so... she had ignored him. She had thought it would be easier that way.

"Your face looks better." She offered instead of answering his question.

It did, the cuts had mostly healed. There was still some light bruising around his eyes and the bridge of his nose. For the most part, he looked like he had before Billy had used his face as a punching bag.

"Thanks." He cracked a small smile and it occurred to Nikki that she might have missed him, which felt strange.

Not that she hadn't missed people in her life. She missed her twin sister and her father no matter how much she didn't want to. She'd missed the idea of her mother, even more so after she'd lost her. She missed Kali even though she knew it was for the best that they didn't see each other. But she had never missed someone like Steve before.

"Do you have your schedule yet? I can show you around the building."

"Harrington." She turned back to lock her car and exit his immediate space. She didn't want anyone that close. "You don't have to do this."

"Do what?" He asked, genuinely confused.

"This!" She gestured between them. "We saved the world together. It doesn't mean you need to look out for me or whatever this is."

"You mean...be friends?"

Nikki frowned at his words. Her mind felt like it was on fire trying to process what he just said. Friends had always been more of a concept to her, never a reality. You can't have friends when you're constantly lying about who you are and leaving town after a few months.

Steve looked hurt for a split second then shrugged it off, almost like he wasn't a stranger to that feeling. "Okay, see you around then."

Nikki watched him turn and begin to walk towards the building. She took a moment longer to let his words sink in. Why would he want to be her friend? She raced after him and cut off his path, planting her feet to ground herself in what she was about to admit.

“I don’t think I’ve ever had a friend.” She adamantly avoided making eye contact with him.

As she said those words, she felt shame creeping up her chest, then her neck, to finally rest in her cheeks. She slowly glanced up at him, but immediately tore her eyes away from his and crossed her arms, creating some kind of barrier to protect herself.

Steve didn’t look at her with pity like she feared. While he knew his situation was vastly different, he had pretty much come to the conclusion the night she’d taken him home and cleaned him up that he also had never had any friends. Not real friends anyway, because whatever Tommy and Carol were, he didn’t think it was friends.

That didn’t mean it didn’t hurt to lose them. He and Tommy had been ‘friends’ since elementary school, had been by each other’s sides since then. It didn’t feel good to lose him, Nancy, everyone...

“Well, that’s everyone else’s loss.” He said, realizing just how out of her element she must feel right now. She hadn’t told him much about her past over those few days, but he knew enough to know that Nikki probably wasn’t good with, well, any of this.

Nikki looked back up into his eyes and didn’t see any sign of a lie there.

“Listen, I don’t know what happened before you came back here.” He sounded sincere. “You didn’t need to stay, to help me and Dustin track down Dart, but you did. Hell, you didn’t have to come here in the first place, but you did. You’re a better person than you give yourself credit for.”

After a few seconds, she nodded, slowly.

“So, can we be friends, then?” He asked, trying to meet her eyes which were still fixed on the ground.



She looked up and took in the openness of him. The willingness to hope for her acceptance but risk her rejection. Even after everything with Nancy.

“Yeah, okay.” She finally said. “We can be friends.”

Then his smile was back. It almost made her smile. Instead she shoved his shoulder lightly to break his eye contact. It didn’t have the desired effect, since when he looked up he wasn’t just smiling but laughing too.

“Come on, I’ll take you to the main office.” He said, and led the way into the school. “We can grab your schedule and I’ll show you where you need to go.”

As they entered the packed school halls, Nikki noticed the heads that turned to look at them. It made her uncomfortable, but Steve didn’t seem to notice. Or if he did, he didn’t care.

“What grade are you in, anyway?” He asked as they passed Nancy at her locker. She smiled at Nikki and Nikki returned the greeting with a small wave. “Like, have you ever gone to school? Should you actually be in the building next door?”

“I was homeschooled, Harrington.” She rolled her eyes. “It’s not like I’m starting from scratch.”

“Oh yeah, ‘homeschooled’.” He used air quotes around the words and she bumped him with her shoulder before he opened the office door and followed her inside.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Thanks so much to everyone who's read and left kudos :) I really appreciate it!

### 3. Chapter 3

#### Summary for the Chapter:

As Thanksgiving break approaches, Steve learns a bit more about Nikki.

#### Notes for the Chapter:

I remembered that El and Mike would not have been dating yet because we haven't even reached the Snow Ball yet in this story. So if you read that bit of dialogue from Dustin before I changed it, no you didn't!

Steve's mom's side of the family started arriving the weekend before Thanksgiving. First his aunt and uncle showed up. Then his cousins' cars started filling up the driveway as their college classes let out for break.

While Steve liked most of his cousins on his mom's side, the idea of being shut in with his family for four full days was stomach turning. By Tuesday afternoon, he had no desire to head back home and start the early Thanksgiving festivities. After Nikki pulled this information out of him, she had instructed him to swing by the trailer after school. They'd sat out on the back deck passing a joint between them and bullshitting until the sun had set.

"Fuck, it's cold." Steve shivered, when the already chilly November day had turned into a frigid night.

They couldn't see the inky water of the lake through the fresh darkness off the deck, but they could still hear it lapping at the bank. Nikki found it all almost peaceful, so she was reluctant to abandon the night for the solitude of the stuffy living room.

Hopper was working late tonight and El was at the Byers with Mike. Nikki hadn't particularly wanted to be around anyone before constantly being near her new family over the next few days, but when Steve had shown up at her locker at the end of the day she

couldn't bring herself to turn him down. Truth be told, she hadn't really wanted to.

"Hop dropped off some cider I can heat up." She offered. "And I'm pretty sure he forgot to clear out some vodka around here somewhere too if we want to spike it."

She slipped her hands into the pockets of her sweatshirt against the cold. Steve had already shoved his into the sleeves of his own jacket and tucked them under his arms. He shook his head. She could see his hair swaying slightly as he did so, illuminated by the porch light.

"I don't know why, but I want ice cream right now," he offered instead.

He ran a hand through his hair now before shoving it back into his sleeve.

"You were just saying how cold it is," Nikki laughed. "Ice cream does sound good though." She said, leaning back in her chair so it balanced on its back two legs. She gazed up at the dark sky speckled with stars.

"We could go to the diner and get pancakes?" He offered, looking over at her profile now but looking more through her than anything. "Shit, is the diner even open?"

"In a minute." Nikki's voice sounded distracted, which caught Steve's attention. She didn't notice him focus on her as she reached out to tug on the sleeve of his sweatshirt. She pointed up towards the sky. "Look."

Steve looked up as well. Even though Nikki had left the lights on in the trailer, the trailer itself was secluded enough that the sky was illuminated with stars in a way he had never seen.

"Wow," he breathed, sitting forward in his chair to truly take in the lights dancing above them.

"Yeah," she smiled. She let a comfortable silence settle between them before a fond memory invaded her mind. "My sister and I used to sneak up to the roof of the lab and look at the stars." She faltered for

a moment, then pressed on. "We would always try to find the Gemini constellation. But I don't think we ever actually did."

"Was it because you're twins?" Steve asked, turning to look at her profile again, still gazing upwards. He could see the look of wonder on her face and he couldn't help the smile it brought to his lips.

Nikki had slowly been opening up to Steve about her childhood, or rather, her time at the lab. Hannah was a subject she still couldn't bring herself to talk about, but she'd at least told him she existed. It was safer that way.

"Huh?" She turned to look at him as well, their warm breath met in the cold air between them.

"Is it because you're twins?" He repeated.

"Oh, no," she chuckled, "that's good though." She smiled at the stars, remembering her and Hannah's childish joy. "No, it's because our birthday is sometime between the end of May and middle of June, so, Geminis."

"Oh, that makes sense," he mused, getting lost in the lights above him again. "Wait!" Steve said a moment later, sitting up abruptly. "You don't know when your birthday is?"

"No?" Nikki had never let herself dwell on this too much, she had a rough estimate of a yearly marker to know she had aged and that was that. "What's the big deal?"

"The big de - so, you've never celebrated your birthday? Never had a cake or gotten gifts or anything?"

He was leaning over the armrest of his chair towards her, a determination to his face. This was the first time Nikki had heard Steve sound this upset since he'd tried, in vain, to get them all to stay back at the Byers with his underwhelming sports analogy.

"Harrington, what part of 'secretly grew up in a lab' don't you understand?" She was smiling at him, laughing even to try and ease the mood. Why was he so upset?

“Yeah, but - ” He was stammering now. “But you escaped!”

“Yeah, but it’s not like I had a family,” she said, and realized that maybe Steve had never put that together before. Maybe he had hoped that she had found someone like Hopper to take her in for a few years. “I bounced around a lot of places with different people, but none of them cared about shit like that. Or me, really.”

Steve sat back heavily in his chair, as if all of the air had been drained from him. She hoped maybe that would be the end of it, but his arms were tightly crossed. When Nikki looked over at him again, he was frowning up at the stars as if they had offended him personally; or more accurately, had offended her without her realizing it.

She didn’t really know what to do. It seemed as if she should be upset by this as well, but she had never felt like it was worth wasting energy on.

“Harrington.” She leaned heavily towards him to get his attention. He wouldn’t look at her, which seemed unfair since this was in no way her fault. “Do you want to get ice cream?” She asked, poking his shoulder.

This got him to turn to her, still with a deep frown on his face. It softened slightly when he saw her looking at him with her head tilted slightly as if she was trying to figure out what she had done wrong.

“You’re right, it’s too cold. Let’s just heat up the cider.” He rose from his chair and swung the trailer door open to stomp his way to the kitchen.

“I think I have donuts too!” She exclaimed having just remembered the snacks stuffed in her fridge and following him into the trailer.

Steve had let their conversation stew in his brain the rest of that night. He almost hadn’t trusted himself to remember it properly. He tentatively asked about it the next morning at his locker and Nikki had rolled her eyes, all air of joking left on the cold porch.

She thought he was overreacting, but it didn't sit well with him. None of the stories she had told him about her childhood did. This one though, there was something about the utter dehumanization of this one that was the final straw for him.

"Steve, the road!" Dustin yelled from his passenger seat.

Steve had let it consume him; long past the school day and basketball practice. He was so engrossed in his own thoughts that he had almost forgotten he'd told Dustin he'd drive him home after the last AV club before Thanksgiving break.

At Dustin's shriek, Steve snapped back to reality and swerved back towards the middle of his lane. There was no one on the road and it was only a curb he almost ran over, but still.

"Jesus, sorry, sorry," he sighed, sitting up straighter in his seat to refocus on the road.

"What the hell was that?" Dustin said, rightfully angry.

"I don't know, I'm sorry," he snapped, then tried to compose himself. "I've just got a lot on my mind right now, that's all."

"Well would you mind getting your mind on the road?"

"Yeah, yeah... I'm sorry." There was a few seconds of silence before Steve couldn't keep his thoughts to himself anymore. "Did you know that Nikki doesn't know when her birthday is?"

"What?" Dustin asked in disbelief. "Who doesn't know when their birthday is?"

"Her! Apparently!" He paused for a moment before barreling on. "And she's acting like it's no big deal, right? Like I'm supposed to think it's totally normal that she doesn't know when her birthday is."

"Do you think El knows when her birthday is?" Dustin asked.

"That's what I'm saying." He shook his head, but didn't take his eyes off the road this time. "Probably not. Brenner sounds like a real -"

“Shithead.” Dustin finished for him. “He was a real shithead.”

There was another moment where Steve gripped the wheel a bit tighter then flexed his hand.

“Do you think I should go to Hopper? I mean, he’s got to know, right?”

“Yes,” Dusting nodded wisely, “you should definitely go to Hopper.”

“Okay, I don’t need the sarcasm,” Steve huffed towards him.

“I just feel like, with Hopper’s attitude over the whole Mike trying to see El every minute he can thing, you storming over to the police station and practically announcing that you and Nikki are dating seems like a bad move.”

Steve frowned. He had no idea what Dustin was talking about. He and Nikki weren’t dating. He shifted slightly in his seat. There was no reason for Hopper to get upset that he and Nikki were friends.

“Okay one, I wouldn’t storm over to the police station,” Steve rolled his eyes. “Two, Nikki and I are just friends, so there’s no reason for Hooper to read into my asking a simple question.” He let Dustin’s silence linger for a moment before asking, “Hopper’s really freaking out about El and Mike?”

“Oh yeah,” Dustin said, “so keep it casual with Nikki if you know what’s good for you.”

“Nikki and I aren't dating,” Steve insisted.

“Uh huh, sure,” Dustin agreed and Steve went to turn to argue with him. “Eyes on the road please, Steven.”

“We aren’t!” He tried to keep himself from yelling to get the point across, but Dustin wasn’t making it easy.

“Yeah, no, for sure, you’re not dating.” Dustin’s disbelief only served to annoy Steve more. “Just keep it quiet for a bit.”

Steve stewed in silence for a minute before he pulled into Dustin’s

driveway and threw his car into park.

“So, don’t talk to Hopper?”

“Not if you like living,” Dustin said before hopping out of the car and slamming the door behind him.

**Notes for the Chapter:**

Thanks so much to everyone who has read and left kudos so far!